



ESSEX EGYPTOLOGY GROUP-REVIEW

“‘God is his potter’: Disability and Bodily Difference in Pharaoh’s Court” Kyle Jordan

Review of August 2022 Meeting by Margaret Lucy Patterson

At the beginning of August Kyle Jordan spoke to the [Essex Egyptology Group](#) via Zoom about the work he has been doing for his Masters degree at University College London on disability and bodily difference in Ancient Egyptian society. The title of the talk is intended to capture the broadest extent of his dissertation, so he began by telling us what the specific question he’s addressing is: “What does the presence of disability and bodily difference tell us about the formation of early court societies in Egypt?”. As a disabled person himself he’s particularly interested in disabilities in the ancient world, and he hopes to bring his lived experience to the study of ancient Egypt in particular. The literature thus far on the subject is pretty sparse, and he thinks that previous scholars haven’t found it worthy of much consideration, but he thinks that the study of disability brings something to the study of history and his work aims to demonstrate this.

He said there are two key parts to his question – the definition and distinction between disability and bodily difference, and the definition of an early court society. He defines disability as the embodiment of impairments that affect a person’s physical and/or mental activities and senses, which is a broad definition that encompasses bodily differences that aren’t disabling as well as those that are. The modern way to think about disability is to see it from a societal perspective – it is something that is imposed on a person by society: for instance as a wheelchair user he is disabled because he can’t always get access to places and events that he wants to, this is not inherent to his wheelchair use but is because society is not designed for him to operate in (i.e. access for a wheelchair is not necessarily provided). Jordan noted that there is a tension between this social model of disability which focuses on the interactions with the society a person lives within, and a more medical model of disability that focuses on the body of the individual and what it can and cannot do.

Definitions and models of disability are difficult to take back to the ancient past as they are thoroughly embedded in a modern conceptual space. And there are a lack of systematic or lexicographical definitions from within the Ancient Egyptian (or other ancient) context – no text sets out an idea of what they consider disabled or how they think of it. But this doesn’t mean that disability didn’t exist before modern times, just that the evidence for it needs to be approached from different angles.

Jordan next talked a bit about the specific theoretical ideas he’s bringing to investigate disability within the Ancient Egyptian context. The first of these is the modern field of Disability Studies. A key paper in this field is [Minich 2016](#), which sets out a framework of how to use Disabilities Studies a methodology to be applied across disciplines. This is a way of thinking about disability and Disability Studies that isn’t bound by the modern social definitions he had just discussed. And this is why he brings together both bodily

difference and disability into one broad definition for his study, so that he is looking at how differences in bodies affect these ancient people across their lives rather than focusing on whether or not they “count” as disabled in a narrower sense.

Another key idea is that of the [ontological turn](#). This is an idea from the field of Anthropology of approaching the understanding of another society (in his case Ancient Egypt) through the perspective of that society rather than just our own modern perspective. This concept also came up in Jordan Miller’s talk to the EEG earlier this year, and he spent a while discussing perspective and bringing an ontological framework to the study of Ancient Egyptian iconography of divine beings ([see my write up](#)). Kyle Jordan is using the framework of Disabilities Studies in this ontological fashion – he is thinking about how the Ancient Egyptians understand the body and seeing how that’s different from our own perspective. And through this he hopes to achieve an understanding of what role these different bodies played in the formation of the Egyptian state.

Jordan now moved on to the second key definition of his research question – what’s a court society? It is defined in Egyptology as “the extended house of the Monarch” in all its dimensions. So this includes the people around the king in a literal sense, but also the wider networks of who they do and do not interact with within society and considers when they do and do not interact with these people. There is therefore a whole spatio-temporal layering of connections, and on top of is the political system within which it exists – kingship, in the case of Ancient Egypt. And in this specific context of the question of bodies within the court society it is the king’s body that is key.

One important concept in kingship related to the king’s body is whether he’s a divine king (as a god he can do anything he wishes) or a sacred king (is kept apart from profane society). Or is he both? Or neither? And what exactly is meant by kingship – does the Pharaoh embody the same sort of kingship as, say, Louis the Sun King? A book that Jordan referenced at this point is [“On Kings” by David Graeber & Marshall Sahlins](#), which he has used to shape his own ideas. He said then once you start thinking about kingship and the king’s body, and then widen this out to include the Ancient Egyptian attitudes to bodies there is something quite nuanced & differentiated going on.

Another thing to keep in mind when considering kingship and the early court society of Ancient Egypt is whether and how power is constructed by the king, or is it constructed by the society around him? There is a social contract that is being devised or negotiated during the process of state formation, and kingship is a designed political process with a certain end in mind – it’s not something that arises *de novo* and at random. And Jordan is particularly interested in the roles the various different bodies played in this process.

Having given us a grounding in the theory Jordan moved on to discussing the evidence for bodily difference and disability in Ancient Egypt that he’s looked at. He told us that he wasn’t going to go through everything, but instead focus on some examples in three key areas that would let him go into detail while not overwhelming us with information. He began with figurines and artistic representations of people with bodily differences. The pieces he showed us date to the Naqada period, which is the period where the early beginnings of kingship take place. They come from several sites including Hierakonpolis, Deir el Ballas and Naqada itself. At these sites a significant number of ivory figurines have been found – mainly of human form, although sometimes animal as well, covering a wide range of bodies. Many of these were found at temple sites but some have also been found in graves. Sadly as with so much material from this time period it was excavated at a point in the development of Egyptology when documentation of finds was rather scanty and vague – as a result he doesn’t have many exact find contexts for the pieces he’s looked at. A lot of them were clearly found in assemblages, but the organisation of these was not well documented and the pieces are now scattered through different collections.

It's not even always clear where the artifacts themselves have ended up – for instance he hasn't been able to track down the the figurines documented in a paper by Ucko from the 1960s, so is working off the photos in the paper.

The examples of figurines Jordan showed us included several that exhibit signs of dwarfism, particularly female figurines. One at least appears to also represent motherhood, as the figure is holding a child. Some of them have large dotted pubic triangles, these are often said to be fertility figurines but he told us he doesn't agree with this. He thinks instead that it indicates maturity. Other examples of bodily difference in the figurines are a figure with a hunchback and one which possibly shows a person with spina bifida. As he said, these figurines are now all dispersed so the precise original context isn't known. However he has used the Main Deposit at Hierakonpolis (where we do have some idea of how the pieces were found) to get an idea of what sort of context these pieces might've existed in. The figurines in the Main Deposit cover a wide range of bodies, including animal ones as well as human ones. The animal ones were arranged in a more chaotic fashion, whereas the human ones were arranged in a more ordered fashion. Jordan noted that the figurines showing bodily difference or disability were found in the human sphere and *not* in the animal sphere. So it seems that the Ancient Egyptians put the emphasis on the personhood of the people represented in these figurines, in contrast to modern scholarship of the same figurines which emphasises their “broken” or “disabled” bodies.

Jordan also pointed out that these figurines are made of hippo ivory. This material is harder than elephant ivory, and is more difficult to carve into these detailed figurines. This is particularly true when working at small sizes – the two he showed us from Deir el Ballas which are now in the Petrie Museum are only 5cm tall but are beautifully detailed. They are also not cookie-cutter pieces all made to a common pattern. There are a variety from this same batch with varying heights and varying postures etc. Taken together this indicates a positive desire to represent these dwarf bodies, and not just any old “dwarf body” but these specific individual bodies, in a difficult to work material – a choice to make these figurines as opposed to using the time to make other things.

Next Jordan moved on to the second of his three areas of evidence – bioarchaeological remains. He told us that he had decided against including pictures of the human remains themselves, because other than demonstrating that they exist the pictures add nothing to his overall point. He picked his examples in order to tie them back to the figurines he'd just shown us so that we have a coherent narrative. The first examples he discussed were two unsexed individuals with Potts Disease – this is a spinal condition where the spine is compressed and the discs are fused. These two lived during the Naqada Period, and were excavated at Adaïma. These people were found with a misshapen pot, and the literature directly links this broken and misshapen pot to the “broken” and “misshapen” bodies. But Jordan thinks that this is a stretch, and betrays modern bias rather than accurately representing ancient thought processes. Mass production of identical perfect pots is a modern thing, in the past this “misshapen” pot would not be unusual as many pots would be imperfect. There was probably no intentional link to the people in the grave. These are not the only examples where modern scholarship has taken the presence of a broken pot as an aspersion cast on the body of the individual it was buried with – Jordan also told us about a dwarf who was buried with a cracked pot. However this dwarf had lived to 40 or 50 years old, quite a good age for a person of this time period where even most able-bodied people died much earlier. So this is not exactly a “broken” person nor are they likely to've been seen so by their contemporaries.

Even though Jordan's primary interest is in bodily difference at the court he has nonetheless been looking at non-elite burials – even if these people weren't directly interacting with the king their presence within society would still shape the court and the social contract developing between king and the court & wider society. Looking at the individuals found buried at the worker cemetery at Adaïma there are a wide array of skull dimorphisms present. Jordan posed the question of whether it's even right to call these

cranial deformations – the high level of such skulls might mean that it's not a congenital feature but has instead been achieved with binding. And in that case it's a desired characteristic so to class it as a "deformation" doesn't accurately reflect the way it was understood by these people and the society around them. Jordan noted that this sort of analysis is complicated by the way that these remains were collected in the late 19th and early 20th Century CE. The skulls have been detached from both their context and their bodies by archaeologists who found them (including Petrie) and saved & initially analysed to investigate theories that now seem racist.

There are also Pharaonic Period examples of human remains with bodily differences. For instance a dancer buried during the Old Kingdom, who exhibited signs of dwarfism – and who also lived to 40 or 50 years old, and Jordan again pointed out that this was a long life. Another example is a woman buried in the workman's cemetery at Giza during the Old Kingdom – she shows signs of dwarfism and was also pregnant (and in labour) when she died with the foetus still inside her. Clearly she was a full member of her society – she was part of a family, also cemeteries chart a social space and interment within one indicates a place in society. Again this contradicts the dominant way of discussing the disabled in modern literature about Ancient Egypt – where they are considered in restricted contexts and as if they were outside of society. This woman demonstrates that this is not the whole truth. The problem with analysing their place in society more coherently is that the evidence we have is sparse, and is also poorly documented.

Another much later example is a woman called Geheset who was buried in the Dra Abu el-Naga necropolis during the 17th Dynasty. She has many traits of cerebral palsy, including accretions on the left side of her jaw that indicate excess salivation during life, and hyperflexibility. Despite the deterioration of her mummy Jordan said that we can tell that none of these traits were corrected during the mummification process. She was preserved as she was, not transformed to achieve an idealised body form. This is something that was done in other cases to restore the individual to health in the afterlife (and Suzanne Onstine talked about evidence of this during her talk about TT16, [see my write up](#)). So from this we can see that Geheset's cerebral palsy wasn't regarded as a defect to be corrected but instead was an essential part of the woman. At the end of the Q&A session Jordan gave a link to [a talk he's presented on Geheset](#).

The examples Jordan had given us so far were of people who have what we would term disabilities, but there are other examples of bodily difference in the cemeteries of Ancient Egypt. For instance a man with gigantism buried at Giza – this is a condition characterised by an excess of growth, which shades into disability as the individual had a lot of arthritis due to how his bones had grown. There are also other examples which Jordan didn't discuss in any depth, such as individuals who used prostheses or individuals who had suffered disabling trauma (like a man buried at Dra Abu el-Naga who shows evidence of having suffered a stroke). But the examples he picked to discuss were selected to give us a feel for the range of differences for which there is evidence.

The third and final strand of evidence that Jordan discussed was the textual sources. The primary ones that are available are tomb biographies and instruction texts. Jordan's first example was the Instructions of Ptahhotep. This purports to be written by a Vizier called Ptahhotep who lived in the 5th Dynasty, and dates to anywhere from the 5th Dynasty to the 12th Dynasty depending on your opinion of the actual authorship of the text. As part of the text Ptahhotep lists his ailments and impairments due to age – these are exaggerated, as he is using them as reasons for why he should retire, but it gives us a list of culturally understood impairments in the Egyptian context. Another example is the tomb biographies of Seneb and Khnumhotep, who were courtiers with dwarfism who lived during the 5th Dynasty – their bodies have long since ceased to exist, but their mastaba tombs with biographies remain. Another example from a tomb is the biography of Harkhuf – he lived during the 6th Dynasty and led several expeditions to the lands south of Egypt, one of which brought back a dwarf dancer for the court of the young Pepi II. And Jordan's final example was the Instructions of Amenemope, who lived during the

20th-22nd Dynasty. This text is the source of the quote in the title of the talk ('God is his potter'), and is a text exploring how to live a pious life in uncertain times – in particular how to live a just life when there is not much justice about. Book 25 of this text concerns the nature of impairment and its occurrence in life. One of its central themes is that one should not mock the afflicted – which implies that people do, but also tells us that such afflicted people existed within society and that it was thought ill-mannered to mock them.

Taken all together Jordan said that these textual sources give us an understanding of how Egyptians felt towards their own bodies and the bodies of others – including their anxieties around getting old and the ailments that come with that. Other texts that can give insight into these sorts of issues are myths – for instance the Contendings of Horus and Seth, or the Book of the Cow of Heaven (which explores the consequences of Re getting old when he is ruler).

Jordan now moved on to the conclusions he is drawing using the theory he introduced us to and the evidence he has given us a flavour of, posing the question of how do we use all of this to construct a model for understanding how the presence of these bodies at the courts of early kings influence how court society developed and the social contract that was formed. One of the key features of the social contract between king and society in Ancient Egypt is that the king needs to demonstrate that he's keeping order and keeping chaos at bay – not just pushing it away but harnessing it within the order of society. This is seen throughout the Pharaonic period of history, but also begins very early and is present during this formative period. Jordan took us through three aspects of this in more detail to explore how disabled and different bodies fit into this framework.



Statue of Seneb & his family in the Cairo Museum (photo © Janet Brewer)

The first of these tenets of the social contract is the act of care. This can be explored through bioarchaeology in particular, and Jordan said that a key text in this field is [a book by Lorna Tilley](#) – in essence it involves looking at human remains to investigate how

people with bodily differences had received care during their lifetime. In the Egyptian context Jordan has extended this to use the tomb biographies of some of these individuals and he took us through what we can glean from Seneb's mastaba even though we do not have Seneb's body. One thing the tomb tells us is that Seneb is part of a large extended family network. His tomb mentions 35 different individuals to whom he is connected, and some of these are also buried in the necropolis and are linked in turn to yet more people. There is a statue of Seneb which is now in the Cairo Museum (see above) and it is in some senses a very traditional statue of a man with his family – man and wife seated together with children depicted in a smaller scale at their knees. But the statue has idiosyncrasies that relate to Seneb's dwarfism – for instances his children stand taking the place of where his legs would've stretched if he had been an able bodied man. And his wife embraces him, but more visibly and physically than is usually the case – suggesting care & support rather than the more usual formal pose.

The reliefs in Seneb's tomb also continue this theme – they do still show him taking part in elite activities as is standard practice. However each scene is a little different to the standard form, reflecting the care that Seneb received in life. For instance in the standard scene of a noble on a boat in the marshes Seneb is not shown sailing the boat himself – instead two men operate the boat for him while he sits on it. The reliefs also illustrate aspects of Seneb's role in society that the bioarchaeology of care cannot – they show how he cared for others in his own turn. Jordan illustrated this with a matching pair of scenes which show Seneb receiving three of his children in one register and receiving three courtiers in another. He is thus shown caring for his children and caring for his duties at court.

The evidence that exists for Khnumhotep, another elite man with dwarfism from the 5th Dynasty, also supports this reciprocal role of care in the lives of those with bodily differences. His primary title was overseer of the *ka* priests – and so his role as a member of this group was to tend, clean and feed the statues of the gods. Essentially providing care to the gods, as he was cared for himself in his life.

Jordan said he sees this reciprocal care as being important when thinking about kingship and the act of care as a tenet of the social contract that Egyptian society was forming. Even though the king in Ancient Egypt is a divine king, his human body still gets old – as illustrated by the way that the god Re in the story in the Book of the Cow of Heaven becomes physically old whilst he ruling as king of Egypt even though he is also an immortal deity. And so while the king is there to care for his people, he will as he becomes old need the care of those same people. There is a giving and taking of care, and these people who Jordan had discussed with their different bodies are a physical manifestation of this care network that everyone is part of. And Jordan pointed out that when you look at Ancient Egyptian society with “care” in mind then you see that it is a big part of that society and underpins a lot of their worldview. For instance the rituals of Egyptian cults are based in the concept of caring for the gods – the statues that house the deities in temples are looked after, they are clothed and fed and generally have their needs met. Mummification can also be seen as an act of care – caring for the deceased individual during their transition from this world to the next. So this is a way in which disability studies can be used not just to examine the lives of individuals with disabilities, but also to illustrate wider points about the wider society in which those individual live.

The next aspect of the king's relationship to his society that Jordan explored is the inverse of the act of care: the power to maim. As with care the king's power to maim is an early and consistent part of the king's imagery. From the very beginning of Egyptian kingship there are images of the king striking his enemies, and starting in the Middle Kingdom there is also increasing amounts of imagery of the king going on campaign or hunting. The enemy in these images is almost irrelevant – the purpose is to show the king exerting control over chaos. A key question here is does this imagery reflect what the king was actually doing – was he going around literally killing and maiming people and these images are pictures of it – or is the representation itself the act and the king didn't do

much literal killing or maiming. And Jordan suggested that actually the Pharaoh's purview for maiming is fairly narrow. There are, of course, the smiting and warfare scenes but actual descriptions of people harming people are restricted to soldiers.

The king himself is only talked about as hurting metaphysical beings, and those depictions of violence from the king seem to be more about metahuman concerns. He is ensuring his place & the place of his people in the order of the cosmos – in fact this is something that is key to the identity of a sacred king like that of the Ancient Egyptians. So Jordan posits that the different bodies of the courtiers are also a manifestation of this metaphysical need for the king to be shown dominating the maimed bodies of people in order to demonstrate his power. But of course these people are not maimed (just differently bodied) and quite probably willing members of the court, so it's not a literal demonstration of the power of the king to maim but instead a metaphysical one.

Human sacrifice is the counter example to this – it did happen in the early period of the Egyptian state, but it was a fairly short-lived experiment. Jordan said he thinks that court society, and the primary value of the act of care within the social contract, pushed back against the actual killing of courtiers by the king. So he sees this as a way that the king is restricted by the court. The king's body is not just that of a man – it is Horus, it is a bull – but despite these manifestations of power to control and maim he is nonetheless restricted by the court and cannot maim in a literal sense as he pleases.

The final aspect of this relationship between king and society that Jordan discussed is states of decorum – this is a concept that has been worked on by John Baines in particular, and is to do with the rules and ideology behind the way that society was depicted on the monuments of Ancient Egypt. The image on Jordan's slide for this hadn't worked for some reason, but it should've shown a relief showing people at work within which were people with various bodily differences. Jordan sees this depiction of the bodily different within society as being about order and chaos, and as relating to the way that earlier cemeteries (such as that at Hierakonpolis) had animals buried in the same cemetery as people. These animals represented chaos that had been brought into the cemetery as a way of demonstrating that the order of human society was dominating the chaos of the wild animals. And in a similar fashion the different bodies are shown alongside the rest of society – the bodily differences are chaos that has been controlled by order. This a necessary part of the functioning of the world – there are two sorts of chaos: that represented by the god Seth, who is deified chaos outside of society, and *isfet* which is the more ordinary sort of chaos that was present originally in the waters of Nun. And this latter type is necessary to bring into society so that order might perpetuate itself.

And as part of wrapping up his talk Jordan pointed out that this is also an idea that is linked to his first aspect – the act of care. Embracing the differences in bodies is a part of how society comes together and develops. And the chaos of these different bodies, the interactions and dialogue between them and the king, is a part of shaping society and shaping the overall order that the king imposes and maintains. Which is a demonstration that from the earliest times of human society we've been dealing with the reality of our selves – not just the idealised forms but the actual real bodies of the people around us.

After the formal part of the presentation was over we had (as we always do) a Q&A session which in this case was particularly long and lively. I don't generally write these up (it's a lot harder given the unstructured nature of such things!) but I shall try and give a flavour of some of the topics covered. One part of the discussion was about how Pharaohs are depicted – the mismatch between some of the mummies and the idealised art, and also the way as modern people we have something of an obsession with Akhenaten's depictions and with whether or not Tutankhamun had disabilities. Jordan sees the way Akhenaten is assumed to be disabled or diseased due to the way he's depicted in art to be an almost dismissive tactic – the art is much more likely to be symbolic but some modern scholarship seems to want to cast him as other to “normal” Egyptian society. And the obsession with Tutankhamun and his various potential ailments

is almost the opposite – there is a large amount of explaining away of the signs of disability that he shows, because it seems like he “can’t be” disabled because he’s the king. Alexandra Morris, who was in the Zoom audience, has worked on this and gave us a link to her 2020 paper on this topic: [“Let that Be Your Last Battlefield: Tutankhamun and Disability”](#).

Another topic was whether people with bodily differences were seen as sacred or special, or whether they lived as a usual part of society. Jordan had a couple of examples, which show different answers to this. The dwarfs who dance for the king do seem to be considered special, but they are sacred within this one context – at that time and place, doing those things, they are sacred. But on the other hand Geheset (the woman with cerebral palsy discussed earlier in the talk) is identified in her burial as Mistress of the House and seems to’ve been acting within society as a normal part of it – she isn’t embodying something sacred, even if there is a sense in which she’s a societal embodiment of the wider cosmic struggle between order & chaos.

Jordan also mentioned that he was in the same class at UCL as Sara Ahmed Abdelaziz Mostafa who spoke to us in April, and there is overlap between their work – this was in response to a question about whether there was any point of difference or disability when an infant might be considered as no longer human. Mostafa is interested in how the burials of even very young infants demonstrate that they were full members of society in death, and Jordan’s examination of the evidence around disability shows that there doesn’t seem to be any point at which these individuals were not people.

There were several other topics raised, but we finished up with a question about Egyptian attitudes to left-handedness (which quite a few of the Zoom audience were) – Jordan pointed out that this is a relatively modern concept. Obviously there were left-handed and right-handed people but there’s no evidence of any noticeable attitude towards it, and certainly none of the connotations that it has in our society (such as the English word “sinister” being derived from the Latin word for left).

This was a fascinating talk, about a subject that doesn’t often get discussed in depth. I found it particularly interesting to hear about how Jordan had used the available evidence to look at how these people with bodily differences were cared for within their society – such as the reliefs which showed Seneb taking part in standard elite activities but with helpers to do things that an able-bodied courtier would be shown doing solo.

Related Links

There were several papers, books and talks referenced during the talk and the ones I have noted down are:

- [A key paper in the field of Disability Studies by Minich \(2016\)](#)
- [A book on kingship: “On Kings” by David Graeber & Marshall Sahlins](#)
- [A talk by Kyle Jordan on the subject of Geheset, an Egyptian woman with cerebral palsy](#)
- [A key book in the field of the Bioarchaeology of Care by Lorna Tilley](#)
- [A paper by Alexandra Morris: “Let that Be Your Last Battlefield: Tutankhamun and Disability”](#)

My write ups of other talks with linked subjects:

- [Maryan Ragheb talked about what jewellery and body ornaments can tell us about body image & identity in Predynastic Egypt](#)
- [Sara Ahmed Abdelaziz Mostafa talked to us about infant pot burials in Predynastic Egypt and what they tell us about the status of these children in their society.](#)

- [Jordan Miller also used the concept of the ontological turn from anthropology as part of the theoretical underpinnings of his work on depictions of composite divine beings](#)
- [Aidan Dodson took us through the early history of Egypt from state formation to the Old Kingdom](#)
- [Renée Friedman talked to us about her work at the elite cemetery at Hierakonpolis](#)
- [As part of her talk Suzanne Onstine discussed evidence for the use of prosthetics in mummification to restore individuals to health in the afterlife](#)